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THE TYRANT OF NOTTINGHAM

HOW ROBIN HOOD CAPTURED THE
CRUEL NORMAN, OSWALD DE BURGH
—AND WHY HE LET HIM GO FREE!

CHAPTER I.

The Storming of Nottingham Castle.

COTCHED in the thick undergrowth of Sherwood Forest, upon which the dews of early morn till lingered, lay Robin Hood, Friar Tuck, and Little John.

Near at hand were scores of the free-booter's warriors, whose costumes so resembled in colour the foliage that there was scarce need for them to keep out of sight. Others were coming in, and Maid Marian had enough to do to bring refreshment to the sturdy fellows who had hastened to answer their chief's summons to arms.

For as though on the wings of an arrow the word that Robin Hood was planning a bold attack upon their enemy in Nottingham Castle had spread mile after mile through glade and thicket; and from the deepest recesses of the forest men came, cheerfully and willingly, so that early in the afternoon Robin Hood had two hundred men at his service.

Not enough. He wanted at least a hundred more to carry out his project of storming the castle and bringing his inveterate foe, the sheriff, to book.

But Robin Hood showed no signs of impatience. He knew that the number of men, and more, would answer his call.

"Hark!" said the young forester suddenly. "I hear a trampling in the distance."

"And the jingle of har-

ness, too," responded keen-eared Friar Tuck.

"Then it is no forester, unless it be one who has not as yet received my summons," Robin rejoined. "Sit you still! I will soon see who it is that comes this way."

Robin stole out of cover, and after dodging among the trees for some time was rewarded with a view of the stranger. A horseman riding at a slow pace was approaching.

As he came nearer, Robin Hood saw that he was armed, and the horse he bestrode was strong and powerful. The stranger wore neither plume nor crest. His horse was barbed, and at his saddle-bow hung a ponderous battle-axe. His shield, as black as night, and bearing no device, was slung at his back, and his visor was partly down.

He came on, humming a lay of war, so much in vogue just then when all Europe was flocking to the banner of the Cross and lord, knight, and peasant not only thought of driving the Saracen from the Holy Land, but dreamed night and day of the vast treasures of the East.

As the stranger was riding in a line of the thicket in which Friar Tuck and Little John lay, Robin Hood went back to them.

"St. Anthony is good to us," Robin said; "he has sent us game which seems to be worth the plucking. Keep you still! I will

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THE EDITOR.

rise presently and accost the cheerful stranger."

"Game, indeed," Little John grunted; "but not the sort of game to my liking. Methinks he is no chicken to handle, but more likely to make dead game of some of us before he turns the edge of his axe to the earth. But, see, he is cautious! Something has startled him. He closes his visor and draws his sword; and now he halts."

"Lie close, and leave the rest to me," Robin Hood said.

So saying, he stepped out right in the horseman's path. The stranger's steed pricked its ears and showed evident signs of suspecting an enemy.

"So ho!" exclaimed the deep voice of the rider. "'Tis only a green jerkin. What ails you? Hark you, fellow!" he cried out to Robin Hood, "I have a mind to cuff your ears, for frightening my horse!"

"In that case," retorted Robin Hood, laughing, "I am in the best of minds to receive your buffet, and to return it, if needs be. The forest is free for every man, whether he wears green jerkin or cases his body in mail."

"You are a bold knave, and your tongue hangs much too loosely," the stranger said. "Pray, Master Green-jerkin, how much of Sherwood Forest do you own?"

"Enough to keep me in food, and some to spare," Robin Hood replied. "Pray, how much of it bows its leafy head and calls you master, that you must threaten to cuff all who cross your path?"

"Why, for that matter," laughed the stranger, "you will have to look elsewhere for an answer. But stand from my path! I have no time for further parley."

"And what if I do not stand from your path, but stand my ground?"

"Then, by St. George! I'll send you home without a head to guide you."

"A rare boast, that," Robin Hood laughed, raising his bow. "I'll make another to keep it company. Lift a hand against me, and I'll riddle you with a cloth-yard shaft!"

"Hark you, fellow!" shouted the

stranger, raising himself in the stirrups, "if you touch string, which will but send a useless arrow against mail of proof, that moment your head and shoulders are six yards apart. Be reasonable, man! I am no tyrant come to hunt a forester from his home."

Robin Hood dropped his bow instantly. There was something in the stranger's voice and manner that did not appear to warrant his dealing roughly with him.

"Well, well," said the forester, "I have no wish to put your demand to the test, nor to run the risk of mislaying my head, which at the present time I stand in need of. Instead of fighting you, I ask you to dine, if you will follow me but a few yards."

"There will be no treachery?" said the stranger.

"Hand and glove. My word is my bond," Robin Hood replied. "You shall be as safe as behind a castle wall at the time of peace, although at the sound of my voice there are two hundred of my men to fight for me."

"What!"

"Nay, nay, doubt me not," said Robin Hood; "though you shall see that I have plenty to back my quarrel. Ho, there, my merry men! Up one, up all!"

The stranger started as into view came the merry foresters where before seemed only tree and bush.

"Receive my guest," Robin Hood said, turning to his men. "Maid Marian! Ho, there, best and sweetest flower of the forest, bring our friend wine and venison and white bread. Little John, go to the maid's help. Now, Sir Knight, sit here at my board and be at your ease."

"May I crave your name, bold and hospitable forester?" the stranger said, dismounting from his horse.

"I am king of Sherwood Forest, save when Richard the Lion-hearted is here," Robin Hood replied. "To his will, but to none other, I bow."

"Have you seen the king?"

"But once," Robin Hood replied. "But what matters that, or what matters my name to you? Here comes the

meal, and I beg you do full justice to it."

"That will I," was the reply. "Beshrew my heart, merry monarch of Sherwood, but eating is more pleasant than fighting to a hungry man. You keep a good larder."

"A larder that runs, flies, and swims," Robin replied. "And now, without fear of having my ears cuffed, I ask your quality."

"I am a poor soldier of fortune, and seek employment."

"Seek you the freedom of the people?" Robin Hood demanded.

"Freedom is as dear to me as my life," the stranger replied. "A Saxon born, I have always waged war against its enemies as heartily as I drink to your health."

"Then I enlist you in my service," said Robin.

"You enlist!" exclaimed the other, in astonishment.

"Ay, why not?" Robin Hood demanded. "I am enlisting good men and true in the cause of freedom. Yes, I enlist you; and here I give you a noble as an earnest that if you serve me well you shall have no reason for complaint. Come, soldier of fortune, raise your visor to the full. I like not a man who is ashamed to show his face."

"I accept the noble," the stranger replied, taking the coin; "and as for my face, you shall see it presently. Have you ever heard of Sir Edward Thorgood?"

"Heard of him!" Robin cried. "Ay, a hundred times and more. In happier days he was my father's best friend."

"And my best friend was Robin Fitzooth, Earl of Huntingdon."

"By Heaven!" cried Robin, "you are Sir Edward Thorgood himself!"

"The same"—raising his visor. "And you are Robin's son. I know all, so there is no need to tell your tale of woe. Hear me."

Overcome with astonishment, Robin waited for what was to come.

"When I heard of how shamefully your father had been done to death," Sir Edward Thorgood continued, "I took an oath to avenge him. I came

hither to see you, Robin, and although I appear to be alone there are a hundred of my retainers not a mile away. We will join forces, Robin, so give me your hand, and when it pleases you my sword and axe are at your service."

Surely such a cheer had never rung through the forest as burst from the foresters. They shouted until their weather-beaten faces were crimson and their honest throats hoarse.

The sturdy retainers which the knight had brought gave Robin Hood all the additional strength he desired, and he decided to move towards Nottingham Castle without further delay. Leaving four of his followers to bring along such members of the force as came later, he rallied his men, and set out at once to where Sir Edward had left his retainers.

Will Scarlet now occupied a post of honour, for from knowledge he had gained he was to point out the weakest parts in the walls of the tyrant Norman's castle.

So confident of success did Robin Hood feel that he decided to put aside the more cautious tactics which he had previously planned, and he now formed the force boldly into marching order.

The news of the intended attack reached Oswald de Burgh when the invaders were in sight of the castle. The blare of trumpets and the beating of drums called the men to arms, and Oswald de Burgh hastened to put on his suit of Milan armour.

"Who are those armed and mailed men in company of the knight with the black shield?" he presently asked of a sentinel crouching behind the battlements. "They are not foresters."

"I know not," was the reply. "They have brought scaling-ladders from the town, and are e'en now constructing a raft to cross the moat."

The castle was soon closely encircled on all sides, and every man that showed himself was picked off by Robin's sharpshooters. So that De Burgh's retainers, galled by the shafts, and not daring to shoot in return, soon began to waver at their posts.

This gave Sir Edward Thorgood's fellows the opportunity they had been

waiting to seize, and bringing up one of the scaling-ladders, they planted it almost at Oswald de Burgh's feet.

Almost at the same moment a roughly constructed but substantial raft was launched into the moat. Sir Edward Thorgood was the first to leap upon it, and as other men crowded on it a mighty shout went up.

"Remember Robin Fitzooth! Revenge the death of Robin Hood's father! Sweet liberty or death!"

Oswald de Burgh, white to the lips, stood, battle-axe in hand. His splendid armour served him well, for the arrows rattled harmlessly upon it.

Crash! went another scaling-ladder over the gateway, and up swarmed the men. In vain the besieged threw down molten lead and stones, the defences of those days, and hacked, hewed, and thrust with sword, axe, and spear.

"St. George for England! Ho, for the merry men of Sherwood Forest!" cried Robin Hood, making straight at Oswald de Burgh. "Now yield, ye murderer and traitor!"

But at that moment a number of De Burgh's men came rushing by, crying: "These are not men, but demons! Save yourselves!"

It was all that was required to make the few who had stood firm lose heart. With one accord they fled. So great was the rush that Robin Hood was nearly overthrown; but, regaining his balance, he rushed again at Oswald de Burgh.

"Yield!" Robin cried.

Oswald de Burgh raised his battle-axe, but there was another stampede among his men, who, in their flight, sent him staggering. Swinging round, he dealt a few lusty blows at his cowardly retainers and then dashed down a staircase.

Robin Hood tore madly after him, and it was at this juncture that Little John made a terrible mistake.

He got in front of his chief, stumbled, and went thundering headlong down the stone stairs. His burly form got wedged in one of the narrow landings, and Robin Hood, unable to stop himself, tripped over him. Then came

Friar Tuck, puffing and blowing with giving and receiving hard knocks, and he, too, fell, and the three lay writhing, kicking, and plunging.

While this was going on, Oswald de Burgh reached a secret door at the back of the castle, and mounting a horse which he had the precaution to have in readiness, he climbed into the saddle and escaped with about twenty of his followers.

Robin Hood was left in possession of the castle; but that De Burgh should slip through his fingers was as the bitterness of gall to his heart.

"By St. Anthony, Little John," he said, "had I known that your bulk was sufficient to block up a whole staircase, I would have sent you down first, and then my enemy's path would have been blocked and he would have fallen into my hands."

"Oh, sad am I!" groaned Friar Tuck, rubbing his shins. "Never will I, a man of peace, take to warfare again, but count my beads morn, noon, and night for the sins of the world."

"Tush! Think yourself lucky that your shaven crown has not a red crack in it," Little John growled. "I' faith, I think I must have broken some of these stairs, solid stone though they be."

Robin Hood now busied himself. To his astonishment, there were quite a dozen prisoners in the castle dungeons — poor, half-starved creatures, some of whom had not seen daylight since they fell into De Burgh's clutches.

These were handed over to Friar Tuck, to his huge delight, who, scenting the great kitchen of the castle as hounds scent a fox, led them thither and regaled them right royally, not forgetting himself.

Robin Hood was loth to sack and burn the castle, as Richard, the king, lodged there at times, but he took many valuable things, including several coffers filled with gold and silver, which that very night he gave to the poor of Nottingham.

When morning dawned Robin Hood and his followers had vanished into the depths of Sherwood Forest; but trusty

scouts were posted everywhere, and a sharp lookout was kept for Oswald de Burgh.

But that craven wretch was in full flight for London, his object being to seek Prince John and implore his help to crush the daring foresters who were harassing him. How he fared must be told in a new chapter.

CHAPTER 2.

The Mysterious Bowman.

RICHARD THE LION-HEARTED, King of England, little dreaming of what was happening, left London to join the Crusaders bound for the Holy Land, leaving the country in the hands of Prince John and a few barons.

The king had no suspicion but that all would be well during his absence, for he had sent to Oswald de Burgh a stern message commanding him to soften the forest laws, and to leave in peace the peasants and commoners.

For all that, as soon as De Burgh poured out his tale of woe to Prince John, the latter, ignoring what he knew to be his royal brother's wish, took steps to crush the foresters of Sherwood. Back to Nottingham went Oswald de Burgh with a thousand men supplied by Prince John; and once more the fortress was strongly garrisoned by a force who set about repairing the damage and strengthening the walls in every part.

A little later came Prince John himself, with schemes for quieting the discontented Saxons, and as part of the schemes heralds were sent out, announcing a great festival and inviting rich and poor to it.

Nothing in the meanwhile had been heard of Robin Hood. He and his invincible archers had, so it appeared, melted into thin air. No traveller passing through Sherwood Forest had seen or heard anything of them, and it really seemed that the freebooter, satisfied with his victory, had taken himself and his followers to a distant part of the country.

And now Normans, Saxons, and Danes flocked to Nottingham at the

bidding of Prince John, and days passed in feasting and revelry. The last day of all was devoted to outdoor sports, particularly to archery, tilting at the ring, and such-like games of skill beloved in those days.

To the best archer was to be awarded a prize of a bugle-horn, mounted with silver, and a silken shoulder-belt, richly ornamented with a medallion of St. Hubert, the patron of the sylvan sports.

Several of the archers wore the royal livery; the others were yeomen. Near the rival archers at the time of the trials stood a tall, bearded man, roughly dressed, who fingered the bow he held rather nervously. Constant exposure to the weather had rendered his face as brown as a hazel-nut, but, in spite of the coarseness of his attire, he bore himself proudly in the midst of so many splendid uniforms and gay tunics.

This man was not quite a stranger to Prince John. On the previous day, when told to move out of the line of procession, he had given a quick answer, and the guards were warned to keep their eyes on him.

For all that, there the fellow was again, as large as life, and as Prince John stepped from his royal seat to get a better view of the archery tournament he saw the object of his previous resentment.

"So, fellow," he said, scowling, "you have not thought it wisdom to take those long legs from Nottingham. But what are you doing here? Yesterday I guessed, by your insolent babble, that you could shoot better with your tongue than with your bow."

"Under favour, prince," the badly-clad yeomen replied, "I have other reasons for refraining from competing besides the fear of being conquered."

"And what may those reasons be?" demanded the prince.

"First," said the yeoman, "having already incurred your grace's displeasure, your anger might be increased if I win."

"Body o' me!" thundered the prince, "I am a mind to— But stay, Sir Ready Wagtongue. Whence come you,

and under which baron or lord do you serve?"

"My name is Robert Locksley," was the reply. "Poor I am, but still a free-man born. My parish is Bournemore, where I am well known. I was tempted hither, like others, to see the sports, and perchance try my skill."

"Then listen to me, Robert Locksley," the prince said. "You shall shoot in your turn, and if you win the prize I will add twenty nobles to it; but if you lose, I'll have the jerkin stripped from your back and order you to be driven from the lists as a loud-talking, insolent braggart."

"And what if I refuse to draw arrow?" said the yeoman, running his fingers through his black beard. "You may drive me from the lists, but you cannot make me bend my bow."

"Refuse my offer," cried the prince, in a towering rage, "and you shall be tied to yonder tree and your bow broken over your back. And more: I'll see that you are branded as a faint-hearted craven."

"This is no fair chance you offer me, proud prince," the yeoman replied, "nor such a one as your royal brother Richard would impose. You pit me against picked archers; but since you insist, ay, and threaten, I have no choice but to obey."

"Look to him, guards, and see that he does not escape," Prince John commanded. "And now, good archers, all shoot with stout hearts and aim."

A target was placed at the end of the avenue which led to the lists, the umpire being an officer of inferior rank, called the provost of the games. Each archer was allowed to shoot three arrows in succession, the score made being shouted aloud by the provost.

One by one the contending bowmen stepped forward and delivered their arrows. Of sixty shafts sent twanging from the quivering strings one only was within the inner ring, a bull's-eye.

This was the work of a ranger named Bertrand, and loud shouts hailed him a victor already.

"Stay," Prince John cried. "We have yet to deal with this fustian-clad

babbler. Now, Robert Locksley, will you try conclusions with honest Bertrand, or deliver up bow, quiver, and belt to the provost?"

"Of a truth I will deliver up nothing," Locksley replied. "Grant that after I have discharged two arrows at yonder mark, Bertrand shall be bound to shoot at one of mine."

"That is but fair," answered the prince. "Hark you, Bertrand, beat this braggart, and I will fill your hands with silver and pennies."

"A man can but do his best," Bertrand rejoined. "My grandfather was in the van of the Norman archers at Hastings, and with no dishonour to his memory."

Locksley stepped forward, and without showing the least fear or anxiety, shot his arrow, and it stuck nearer to the centre of the bull's-eye than Bertrand's.

"Now, by St. Paul," exclaimed the prince to the astonished ranger, "if you suffer the knave to beat you, your neck is fit for nothing but the gallows."

"An your highness were to hang me, a man can do no more than his best," Bertrand replied. "My grandfather was in the van of the Norman archers at Hastings, and—"

"The fiend seized your grandfather and all his generation," Prince John interrupted. "Shoot, rascal, and shoot your best, or it shall not go well with you!"

Bertrand took his place, and making allowance for the breeze, sent his arrow into the very centre of the target.

"A Bertrand! A Bertrand!" shouted the people, and the prince, joining in the applause, clapped his hands.

"By the wonders of the stars, you cannot beat that, Locksley," he said.

"I can do no more than my best," Locksley replied. "And my grandfather was not a Norman archer."

The next moment the arrow was speeding on its way, and to the amazement of the beholders it split Bertrand's shaft in twain, and remained deeply embedded in the target.

The people stood in a maze.

"This man is no archer, but a sorcerer," they whispered to each other. "Such shooting was never seen since a bow was first bent in England."

"And now," said Locksley, turning to the bewildered prince, "I crave your permission to plant such a target as I was taught to shoot at. If it pleases you, let your guards attend me; I go but to cut a rod from the nearest willow."

He chose one about six feet in length, perfectly straight, and rather thicker than a man's thumb. He began to peel it with great composure, stating at the same time that to ask a good archer to shoot at such a target as had been used was to put shame upon his skill.

"Now," he added, planting the rod upright in the ground, "he who hits that at four-score yards may well account himself an archer."

"The saints save us," Bertrand gasped, "I'll not try. I might as well shoot at a sunbeam, or at the moon, as at a white streak I can hardly see."

"Cowardly dog, to be outdone by a clod," Prince John raved. "Locksley, do your best, and if you hit such a mark, I will hold you a marvel of skill. But however it be, you shall not crow over us with mere words. Shoot, and I'll warrant you prove yourself a boaster, although I confess you have done well."

Locksley stepped forward, and taking aim with great deliberation, split the willow rod so clean that the two parts fell as though cleft with the sweep of a razor.

A roar of wonder and admiration arose from the multitude.

"Now, by all the splendour of the world," the prince cried, "you have won horn, belt, and many nobles. We will make them fifty if you will but wear our harness and be near our own person. What say you to my offer, friend Locksley?"

"So," laughed the archer. "I am no longer braggart and varlet, good prince. As to your offer, I have vowed that if I took service it would be with your royal brother, King Richard.

These twenty nobles I give to yonder chapfallen Norman, Bertrand, and perchance he will give some of them to the Church that his grandfather's soul may be prayed for."

"What! you refuse my offer?" Prince John exclaimed.

"I must. I have my reasons."

"Come, Locksley, speak out and tell me what those reasons are."

"Your pardon, prince," the archer replied. "My reasons, like my thoughts, are my own property, and so I keep them."

"Oh, go your ways for a moody churl," Prince John said, turning angrily away.

Oswald de Burgh, sheriff of Nottingham, had been watching Locksley closely. Now, stepping to Prince John's side, he whispered:

"Methinks, sire, that you are letting the fellow off too easily. I have my suspicions. He may be one of Robin Hood's spies, if not, indeed, that arch-traitor and outlaw himself."

The prince started angrily.

"Say you so? Then we will detain him," he cried. "Ho, guards, tell Master Locksley that we would have a word with him."

"I have no time," said Locksley, when the message was delivered to him. "I have seen and enjoyed the sport, and will e'en go home."

"Fool," growled the messenger. "Is not your neck long enough already, or do you yearn to have it stretched while your feet dance on nothing? Away, friar; this business is not of thine."

The last words were occasioned by a monk of portly build who, with his cowl drawn close over his face, had walked between them, and by an accident had trodden on Locksley's foot.

"Son," quoth the friar to the Norman retainer, in a deep sepulchral tone of voice, "the time will come when you will not address a father of the Church so roughly. If the pangs of death overtake you suddenly, your first cry will be, 'Where is the priest? where is the priest?' Take heed that you require not one ere the sun hath set."

"Now, by the rood!" cried the burly

armour-clad soldier, "that sounds like a threat."

"Come, come," said Locksley, impatiently, "let us end this business. As for you, father, I forgive you for bringing your heavy foot on my toes. Depart, I pray you. And now, soldier, return to Prince John and tell him that I am in no mood to tarry."

"But the prince must be obeyed, and you shall return with me even if I have to carry you on my back."

"I' faith!" Locksley retorted, "put but a hand upon me and I'll lay you flat on your back, and make you the laughing-stock of the whole multitude."

White with rage, the soldier made a pluck at Locksley's beard. It came off in his hand, revealing the features of Robin Hood, king of Sherwood Forest.

Then a remarkable thing took place. In one moment a change came over the attitude of the people. Brown fustian turned to Lincoln green. The friar fetched from under his cassock two pieces of oak which he joined, thus making a formidable quarter-staff, and, hitherto unnoticed, there came thundering along a man of gigantic stature, who, swinging an iron-studded mace, cried:

"Ho, there, foresters bold! To the rescue! Sweet liberty or death! Rescue! Rescue!"

The guards had seized Robin Hood, but arrows were whistling about their ears, and they let him go. One fell, crying out that he was mortally wounded, and now all around them were fighting and shouting.

Prince John saw that his life was in danger, but his dignity would not permit him to take to his heels, as he fain would do.

"Spare the prince, but secure Oswald de Burgh," cried Robin Hood. "Bring him to me, alive, if may be, but let him not escape."

Pandemonium had broken loose. On all sides there were crowds of fighting-men, and the countryside streamed with the faint-hearted fleeing for their lives. The women and children ran screaming from the scene, but no harm

was done them; indeed, the men in Lincoln green protected and made room for them.

The entrance to the castle was choked with henchmen, retainers, and soldiers, all for the nonce leaders, and shouting out orders that came to nothing.

Somewhat reassured, but overcome with rage and astonishment, Prince John resumed his seat in the magnificently embroidered chair, and, sheltered by a shield held by a knight, watched the scene as well as he could. And it was a wonderful sight his eyes gazed upon.

The colour of green was now everywhere, but after a while the foresters took more open order, and came on at the double, shooting their arrows and uttering their war-cry, but never wavering for a moment.

What to do, Oswald de Burgh did not know. He turned a yearning glance on the castle, and raved against the rabble crowding into it for safety.

He could not leave the prince. To have fled and left the saturnine brother of Richard just then would have cost him his head. But although he was surrounded by picked men of his body-guard, he saw which way the tide was turning. Those terrible shafts from the foresters of Sherwood played havoc amongst the soldiers.

Prominent in the affray were Robin Hood, Little John, and Friar Tuck, who, displaying wonderful agility, used his quarter-staff as if it were a light cane, and everywhere it fell, down dropped a man.

On and yet on they came.

"By all the gods of war," cried Prince John, "they will take my life! Yet how gloriously they fight! Had I but a thousand such men, I would defy all comers. Ho, there! close round me!"

"Fear no evil, proud prince!" Robin Hood shouted. "I seek none but Oswald de Burgh, and him I will have! Advance, my good men! Well striven, all! The story of this day shall be told when England is a thousand years older!"

Prince John now saw that it was time to leave his chair and look to himself.

"Act on the defensive, but strike not," he said to his guards, "or, by St. George! some shaft or blow will deprive Richard of a brother."

Oswald de Burgh was now fighting with the fury of despair. Fear lent him courage, and finding that all hope of escape was cut off, he used his sword like a man of valour, until he grew faint with exertion.

His shield fell from his hand, his scathed sword moved but slowly, and when at length Robin Hood seized him by the throat he called out, in a voice hoarse with baffled rage and agony:

"I yield! Spare my life!"

Robin Hood pushed him into the arms of Little John, and the giant, throwing the Norman over his shoulder like an empty sack, trotted away.

With the capture of Oswald de Burgh, hostilities ceased, much to the relief of Prince John, who all the time the fighting had been going on had almost choked with fear and indignation. But now his rage broke like a tempest.

To have his ally, Oswald de Burgh, snatched away from under his very eyes, and now to see Robin Hood walking calmly about and assuring the soldiers in royal livery that he was not fighting against them, but a tyrant, roused all John's black blood.

"Hark you, outlaw!" he thundered, shaking his fist. "you came here disguised, like a thief in the night, and we had your way; but by the lightnings of Jove you shall come before me again in a different guise! Have a care that I do not burn Sherwood Forest from end to end!"

"Forsooth, it matters not to me," Robin Hood replied. "Prince, you accuse me of coming here disguised. True: I confess it. But you cannot say but that I have fought openly. And listen, Prince John! Robber I am called, and robber I may be, but not as the world knows me. If I take from the rich with my right hand, I give to the poor with my left. And a man had better be a common thief than steal from his brother!"

Prince John's face turned purple, and

the thick veins on his brow tightened and knotted like cord.

"Insolent hind!" he roared. "For every word of these insults you shall suffer tortures!"

"Petty prince," Robin Hood sneered, turning upon his heel. "I laugh and snap my fingers at your threats. And hark you! Had your royal brother known that which I know, he would not have been in so much of a hurry to depart for the Holy Land, nor to leave his brother John to tax the people of England to fill his own purse."

So saying, Robin Hood shot an arrow in the air as a signal of his victory, and swinging round, marched triumphantly away, with his followers falling into step behind him and acclaiming him King of Sherwood until their throats ached.

On the borders of the forest he was met by Maid Marian, clad in rich velvet, trimmed with fringe of gold, and mounted on a pure white palfrey.

Robin greeted her with a lover's kiss, and then, it being no part of his plan that all his followers should witness his meeting with his captured enemy, Oswald de Burgh, he commanded that a feast should be served there and then to mark the victory before the Saxons departed for their several homes.

Huge wallets were produced as if by magic and unpacked, and out of them came venison pasties, cream cheeses, and other delicacies; and feasting and merriment ruled the hour.

While the fun was at its height there came a messenger to Robin telling him that Little John with the captive De Burgh had reached the secret cave. Still the outlaw leader lingered, and not until everyone else had departed did Robin and Marian turn and make their way towards the forest stronghold. Indeed, the soft light and the sweetness of the dawn lay on the earth when eventually they reached the cave. Life and beauty were on tree, bush, thicket, and green glade.

"Oh, Robin," Maid Marian said, as she clung to his arm, "why cannot men enter into such peace as this? Why

should there be war, strife, hatred, when the world is so lovely?"

"Sweetheart," Robin replied, smiling, "there are tyrants everywhere. The hawk pounces on the sparrow; the wild-cat creeps stealthily where the partridges nestle amid the long grass; the hound strains at the leash when he scents the deer; and man is a greater tyrant and destroyer than them all. Not satisfied with killing that he may live his allotted time, he kills for gain, for gold—the yellow gold, one grain of which cannot follow him after his days are done. But, come, let us see how our august prisoner fares."

Maid Marian clung pleadingly to his arm.

"Robin," she said, "you will not kill him? Wicked as he is, and just as any punishment would be to him, do not stain your hands with his blood."

"You forget how cruelly he put my father to death," Robin returned moodily.

"Nay, that I do not; but let him see you are the nobleman and he the churl," Marian rejoined.

"Rest assured that he shall have full justice shown him," Robin replied.

Little John and Dick Driver, a sprightly young forester, had divided the duty of keeping watch over the prisoner. No galling chains hung from his limbs, but his hands were tied, and a piece of rope held him to a huge oaken log.

But Little John had taken care to see that the prisoner fared well so far as eating and drinking were concerned. Indeed, a kind of rough hospitality had been shown him, at which Oswald de Burgh had wondered, for he thought of no better fate than being hanged without delay.

Friar Tuck did not seem particularly interested in the proceedings that were to take place.

Saying that a man of peace required more rest than "he who goes forth with bow and sword to slay," he rolled himself in a corner and began to snore forthwith.

After acknowledging the salutes of the men who comprised the regular de-

fence of the stronghold, and exchanging a few words with Little John, Robin Hood walked to within a few paces of where Oswald de Burgh sat silent and moody, and folding his arms tightly he thus addressed the Norman:

"How now, sheriff of Nottingham, and so-called lord of Sherwood Forest? Methinks a change has come o'er the scene, and such a one that is none too pleasant for you to dwell upon."

"Say what you will," Oswald de Burgh returned, shrugging his shoulders. "I am in your power. It is easy to twit a defenceless man."

"A defenceless man!" Robin Hood repeated, with scorn. "Great Heaven! hear this fellow talk of defenceless men, when he has imprisoned, tortured, and maimed poor creatures by the score! Listen, villain! What harm had my father done that you should hound him down and consent to his hanging? Was it because I trounced one of your bullying rangers? Was it for that deed my father died?"

"Guy of Gisborne, my steward, said that your father sent a message of defiance to me."

"Ay, he defied you when you commanded him to quit the home he had learned to love," was Robin's stern reply. "Was it not enough that you Normans should steal his lands and title and send him forth almost a beggar? My mother was of gentle birth, and she died of a broken heart while alien feet danced in the halls she had graced. And you!—and you!—Oh, how hard it is to keep my hands from your throat! But I have learned a lesson, and taken it to heart. Come hither, Marian."

Pale and trembling at the outpouring of his passionate words, Maid Marian went to his side immediately.

"Oswald de Burgh," Robin Hood continued. "thank this lady, not me, that e'en now you are not choking to death at the end of the rope that now holds you. Such, indeed, was my intention. You were the cause of my father being murdered, but I will not take your life in so cowardly a fashion. At noontide you shall have the choice of fighting me or any of my men here, and if you sur-

vive I promise to send you back to Nottingham."

"Certainly will I not choose you," Oswald de Burgh replied, brightening a little. "Give me longer time. I am still weak."

"Not weaker than any man in this cave, so let us have no more idle excuses," Robin said. "If you refuse to fight you shall hang. By the saints, I trow you would not extend such mercy to me were I in your power."

"Rascall, cruel traitor and forger!" said Sir Eustace Alleyne, walking past the prisoner. "Choose me for your opponent, I beg."

"Fawning mongrel!" cried Sir Edward Thorgood, striding up, "my sword tingles in its sheath to find its way into your heart."

At this moment Robin Hood's faithful staghounds, Hector and Vulcan, raised their heads, and sniffing the air, uttered short, warning barks.

"Be quiet," Robin Hood said. Then going to the entrance, he called: "Sentinel, who comes this way?"

"A stranger," was the reply; "but he is still in the distance. Twice I have seen him through the trees, and methinks he has lost his way."

The man spoken of was long, lean, and bony, like the mule he rode. His clothes were of the poorest description, but his saddle-bags were bulky, and on his back was strapped a pack. He had evidently lost his way, and was in a great fright.

"Why, 'tis Gaspard, the miser and usurer!" cried Robin as soon as he caught a glimpse of the fellow.

"What!" said Little John, poking his ponderous head through the leafy screen that hid the entrance to the cave. "Is it Gaspard, who is so hard on the poor, driving them out of their homes when they cannot pay, and putting them to prison if their goods do not reach the value of his exorbitant claims?"

"The same," Robin Hood replied. "But let be. He is coming this way and will give us good sport."

"A finer fish could not come to our net," Little John observed, rubbing his

hands. "Did not one of your scouts mention that Gaspard, fearful of the scenes which were taking place at Nottingham, thought of getting away?"

Meanwhile, the lean and certainly hungry-looking Gaspard's heart was much heavier than his pack. His object had been to carry a lot of his ill-gotten gains to a village near Nottingham, and to avoid being seen he had taken to the fringe of the forest; but the mule had run away with him, and here he was, in a terrible fright, and where, he had no more idea than the man in the moon.

Soon Robin Hood gave Will Scarlet a sign he understood, and the young forester stepped out demurely, staff in hand, and pretended to limp.

"Your pardon, gracious sir," he said, appearing suddenly before Gaspard. "May the son of a poor down-trodden forester crave your charity?"

"I have nothing to give," Gaspard snarled, "so get you from my path."

"Nay, be not so uncivil," Will Scarlet rejoined. "Hunger is a sharp thorn, and poverty is no crime. Now, had I but the good luck to fall across Robin Hood—"

"Robin Hood!" Gaspard interrupted. "The mention of his name makes my flesh creep on my bones. But he is not here. This is not the part of the forest where he roves."

"Would it were," Will Scarlet said. "Robin Hood may be an outlaw, but he turns no starving man away. But whither go you? To the very heart of the forest?"

"Heaven forbid!" Gaspard said. "Guide me to a broad path which will take me to Gurley Green, and I will give you a groat."

"This might be the way," Will Scarlet replied, pointing in the direction of the cave. "Stay, good sir... Do you not feel that the belly-band of your mule has come undone?"

"Buckle it up! Buckle it up!" Gaspard rejoined sharply. "Oh, Moses and all the prophets! where am I going?"

Will Scarlet, stooping and pretending to put the band right, had placed his shoulder under Gaspard's foot and tossed him clean out of the saddle.

Even while the miser was on his hands and knees and rubbing the crown of his head, a loud burst of laughter started him still further out of his wits.

"Did I hear the good gentleman say that he wanted to see the King of Sherwood Forest?" said Robin Hood, strolling up at that moment. "If so, here he stands. Why, surely my eyes do not deceive me? Yes—no—yes. Good Master Gaspard, how wags the merry world with you?"

CHAPTER 3.

A Duel with Quarter-staves.

THE sight of Robin Hood was like a horrible dream to Gaspard the usurer. He had known Robin's father, and hated him because of his generous nature; but, to the best of his knowledge, he had never seen the outlaw of Sherwood Forest until that moment.

"Mercy!" he howled, clasping his hands frantically. "Oh, sir, do not hurt a poor old man, a—a sinner like yourself."

The noise he made awakened Friar Tuck, and he, blinking like an owl in the sunlight, came out to see what was the matter.

Robin Hood gave him a sign to be quiet, and then, turning to Gaspard, said:

"Why, what ails you, fellow? What manner of man do you take me for?"

"Jud—jud—judging by your appearance, I take you for Robin Hood," Gaspard stammered.

"In saying so you make no mistake," Robin Hood replied. "Now, listen: if you are poor, you shall not be sent away empty of stomach, or empty-handed. You know Oswald de Burgh?"

"Oh, certainly, great sir; I know him to be of no good repute. He is a greedy, grudging man, who does not scruple to take tax and tithe from such a poor man as I."

"Your name?" demanded Robin Hood.

"Thomas Scales," replied Gaspard unblushingly, and lying with his accustomed clumsiness. "And I do assure you that this pack contains only a few

worthless odds and ends—all I possess on this earth."

"How the varlet lies!" growled Friar Tuck, elbowing back others of the band who had left the cave to see what was afoot.

"Very well," Robin Hood said; "I will see that you are well weighed in the balance, Master Scales. I spoke of Oswald de Burgh, because just now it happens that he is my guest. So, Master Scales, you will have good company. But come; let us get within. Little John, I pray you relieve this poor gentleman of the burden on his back, and help him into the cave."

"I can walk very well, noble sir," Gaspard responded, in quavering accents. "Give me leave to depart henceforth, and I will bless your name, and pray for you for ever."

"Most of the prayers in this part of the world are left to me," quoth Friar Tuck, with a twinkle in his eye. "That is because I am a man of peace; for if I am smitten on one cheek I turn my whole face to my adversary."

"No man leaves Robin Hood without partaking of his hospitality," the outlaw said. "Now, sir, go where Little John directs you, or, by St. Hubert, he shall carry you, with your head where your legs generally are."

"If I must," Gaspard groaned, "I beg you let me take the saddle with me. In it there are papers concerning my humble cottage, on which I hold a lease."

"What, my guest, and a poor one too, carry his own luggage!" cried Robin Hood, with a ringing laugh. "That shall never be said of the king of Sherwood Forest. Again I ask your name. Speak truly, now, for if you tell me a second lie it were better that you never were born."

"And say your prayers, too, and quickly!" growled Friar Tuck in Gaspard's ear.

"Oh, good Robin Hood—oh, good, gracious Robin Hood," the usurer moaned, "why look you so stern on me? Have pity. I—I—Oh, dear! I am travelling by the name of Thomas Scales, but my real name is Daniel Gas-

pard, a poor man—a wretchedly poor man—I do assure you."

Here Little John gave Gaspard one of his gentle pushes, which sent him flying headlong in the direction of the cave, and Ned Carter, amid roars of laughter, lifted the usurer's legs and trundled him, wheel-barrow fashion, right in.

The first person in the cave that Gaspard saw as soon as he could collect his senses was Oswald de Burgh, who bestowed a withering scowl upon him.

"Oh, great sheriff, here's a dreadful fix!" Gaspard groaned, crawling to the other end of the log and sitting down.

"Talk not to me but look to yourself," Oswald de Burgh replied. "Me thinks you will find that quite sufficient for the nonce."

The sheriff's tone showed the bitterest contempt for his fellow prisoner.

"Oh, here they come with my pack and saddle!" Gaspard moaned. "I am undone! I am a ruined man! The saints preserve me! I shall not be left with a groat to buy a crust. Oh, fool, thrice fool that I was to trust myself an inch in the forest!"

"How now?" said Robin Hood, taking out his hunting-knife and ripping at the tightly knotted cords that secured the pack. "You told me that there was nothing here but a few odds and ends."

At first sight the pack seemed to contain nothing but rags and rubbish, but presently out there tumbled gold nobles and broad silver pieces. The saddle-bag, too, proved to be a mine of wealth; for, besides a large quantity of money, there were many articles of jewelry and trinkets which must have been taken from the poor cottagers of Sherwood.

"Daniel Gaspard," at length cried Robin Hood. "I know you to be cold-blooded, hard-hearted; and I doubt not but all this is the fruit of usury. Therefore will I see that this money and these things are returned, as far as possible, to the people you extorted them from."

Then, holding up a necklace of pearls, he said:

"How much is this worth?"

"Five nobles, sir. I paid for it in solid gold," groaned the terrified wretch.

"It shall have a better resting-place than in a filthy rag," Robin Hood replied. "Sweet Marian, when you have washed this pretty bauble at the spring, wear it on your own fair neck, and never forget that generous Daniel Gaspard made you a present of it."

"Oh, I am undone! Mercy!" from the half-fainting Gaspard.

"Now, by St. Dominic!" exclaimed Friar Tuck. "what's this? A rosary, with chain of gold and turquoise beads. That should go well with the necklace, Robin, so pass it over to the sweetest and best of maids. I would have asked it for myself," he added, with a comical look, "but, having taken the vow of poverty, people would scoff if they saw me with so valuable a thing."

"Oh, heavens, I cannot bear this!" Gaspard cried, starting to his feet. "I'll not be robbed. I'll—I'll—"

"Gag the varlet, and tie his hands behind his back!" commanded Robin.

This was done, and Gaspard was planted at the feet of Oswald de Burgh.

"Now, Friar Tuck," went on Robin Hood, "you have a brusque manner like the rest of us, but you are an honest man. Take this money, and see that it goes to the poor, save ten nobles, which we will keep for our own expenses."

"Ay, that will I," Friar Tuck replied. "And hear me, you chapfallen miser. If you can find proof that I have employed one coin to my own uses, I'll give you leave to shave my crown with the roughest flint stone that can come out of earth."

"I have a great mind to hang you with a rope made of your own rags," Robin Hood continued, turning to Gaspard. "I have heard so much of your cruelty from the poor people who have been compelled to borrow, that I had it in my mind to pay you a visit. But I thank you for saving me that trouble. Ned Carter, give him a little wine. I' faith, he looks as white as the face of a chalk cliff."

Ned Carter dutifully removed the gag from Gaspard's mouth, and held a horn

of wine to his lips. The miser gulped it down like a hungry pike taking a bait.

"You shall have the use of your tongue if you'll promise to make good use of it," Robin said. "Why, look you, I am only doing what is right, and teaching you a lesson which you should profit by. With all my seeming harshness, I am but cruel to be kind. But now to break our fast. Come one, come all, freemen and prisoners; you shall all eat of the best. Ho, there! Spread a feast in the open air. Unbind Oswald de Burgh and Gaspard, too. We will be one party until the stroke of twelve, and then the sheriff shall pick out a man to fight him."

Oswald de Burgh began to hope that there was some chance of escape without fighting, but that was soon nipped in the bud. Robin Hood planted three of his best sharpshooters at equal distances to keep a lookout, and to send cloth-yard shafts after the prisoners should they take suddenly to their heels.

The best that the outlaws' larder afforded was brought forth, and so good was it that even Gaspard cheered up for the time at getting such a magnificent meal for nothing; nor, judging from appearances, had Oswald de Burgh lost his appetite.

At length the repast came to an end, and no sooner were the remnants cleared away than Robin Hood rose.

"Oswald de Burgh," he said, "the time has come for you to make choice of an opponent. Men of Sherwood Forest, form."

They drew themselves into a line, and Oswald de Burgh's eyes roved up and down.

He saw no man there but whom he had reason to fear in a conflict, and for more than a minute he sat pondering, now picking this one and that, but changing his mind a dozen times. Then like a flash an idea rushed into his mind. The friar! He was portly and a man of the Church, and little could he know of fighting! So argued the Norman, in his ignorance of the fact that good Friar Tuck was one of the

stoutest wielders of the quarter-staff among the outlaw band.

"Since you force me to this, bold Robin Hood," said De Burgh slyly, "I will ask you a question. Do you count yonder friar a follower?"

"Ay, indeed I do," Robin replied; "and I have no more faithful follower than Friar Tuck in my ranks."

Friar Tuck started as though a hornet had stung him.

"Now, by Peter and Paul," he exclaimed in mock fear, "this is beyond a jest. What, I, a man of peace, measure blades with a man so skilled in arms as Oswald de Burgh? Protect me, ye saints, I must be dreaming."

"Ho! ho! ho! ho!" roared Little John, flinging his brawny arms above his head. "What a merry fight it will be!"

"A merry fight, you bull of Bashan," said Friar Tuck. "What, do you rejoice in the prospect of seeing this poor body of mine lying a mass of horrible bruises at your feet? Fie upon you! Fie for shame! Oh, why did I leave my hermitage and the peaceful toads and frogs that were my companions?"

The friar's fat sides shook, but whether with fear, those who stood near him were the best judges.

"Noble Robin," Friar Tuck continued, digging his knuckles into his eyes, and grimacing so comically that the foresters roared again. "Tell me that my ears have deceived me, and make me happy. Fore Heaven, how can a man of my age and build cope with such a warrior as Oswald de Burgh?"

"My faith!" Robin Hood replied, turning his head aside to laugh. "I see no way out of it. I cannot go back from my word; so, friar, you must fight."

"What with?—bladders or bags of feathers?" quoth Friar Tuck. "Oh, good Robin, noble Robin, bestow your pity on a man of peace. If I am slain, where will you find another friar?"

"I know not," replied Robin, almost shaking with suppressed laughter. "All this, and more, is in my mind, but still I cannot but say that Oswald de Burgh

is within his rights. Friar, I tell you again that you must fight."

"That being so," Friar Tuck groaned, "the choice of weapons is mine, since I am the challenged man. In the days of my youth I did hand'e the quarter-staff aptly, and with the quarter-staff will I fight now, or nothing."

"Ho, there!" cried Robin Hood. "Bring forth two well-seasoned staves. Form a ring, my merry men, and look wel' to Gaspard that he escape not."

Oswald de Burgh's face had turned almost as green as the grass beneath his feet.

"The quarter-staff is the weapon of knaves and varlets," he said. "Give me a sword, or axe, and I will defend my life, but—"

"I'll have no ifs and buts here," Robin Hood interrupted. "The odds are vastly on your side, and if you refuse to fight, you shall sure'y hang."

"I'll fetch the rope," said Little John. "Methought it would be required before long, so I kept it handy."

"Stay," Oswald de Burgh cried. "I'll try a hand with this friar, who, did he wish, could wield a sword as we'l as any man here. His choice of the quarter-staff is only to degrade me."

"Degrade you," Robin replied, scornfully. "Who are you? What difference is there between your flesh and blood and any man's here? I trow but that the humblest charcoal burner in the forest who feeds on roots and black bread has a better chance of going to heaven than Oswald de Burgh. So take your chance, and try to be a man!"

A large ring was formed, and Friar Tuck, testing his quarter-staff, walked into the centre of it, and tucking up his cassock until his knees were bare, stood ready.

"If I die," he said mournfully, "bury me under the old hawthorn bush where the mavis sings at early dawn. Little John, villain that you are to stand there laughing, if fortune favours me, I'll fall upon you as you sleep."

"Oh, then indeed shall I be wholly smothered!" responded Little John. "Be merciful, friar, and send me a better death."

Robin Hood began to grow impatient at the delay.

All the time Oswald de Burgh had been hoping that aid would come to his rescue, and even now he clung to that hope, as a drowning man clings to a straw.

But there came to his ears no sound of the tramp of horses, nor through the trees the flash of steel, and muttering an oath between his teeth, he snatched the remaining quarter-staff from Little John and fixed his baleful eyes on Friar Tuck.

Even then Oswald de Burgh hesitated, to see that no trick had been play'd with the quarter-staff; whereat Little John got so savage that he cried out:

"Crack him over the sconce, good friar! Crack him over the sconce!"

"All in good time, my pretty babe," Friar Tuck replied cheerfully. "Now, Oswald de Burgh, although I am a man of peace, I'll wager you a noble that you are down first."

Then the jolly monk's eyes began to blaze. He stretched out his neck until his double-chin vanished, and planting his left foot firmly, he advanced a step with his right, at the same time giving so quick a twirl with the quarter-staff that it seemed to writhe in the air like a snake.

Down it came sideways, and catching Oswald de Burgh full on his left arm, sent him staggering right across the ring against the unhappy Gaspard.

"A hit! A hit!" cried Robin Hood.

"More by luck than judgment, perhaps," Friar Tuck said. "I meant to strike an inch lower down, and I'll try to do better next time."

Oswald de Burgh's blood was now raised to fury. The b'ow had not hurt him so much as it had bewildered him with the skill of its delivery, and seizing his quarter-staff in a grip of iron, he uttered a savage cry and rushed like a bull at his portly antagonist.

Not an inch did Friar Tuck budge. He pushed forward his hands, gave them a twist, and thrusting the quarter-staff between Oswald de Burgh's legs, lifted him clean off his feet and hurled him into the air.

Down he came, with a sprawling crack that shook every bone in his body.

Even Robin Hood and his followers were astonished at the feat. They had never seen the friar accomplish such a one before, and although filled with admiration, they stood silent, waiting for what was to happen.

Two foresters assisted Oswald de Burgh to rise, but seeing that he was badly shaken Robin Hood said:

"There shall be a spell of rest, while I count thirty slowly."

"Hold!" Oswald de Burgh cried. "I will have no more! Yonder man is more of a fiend than a friar!"

"And you," Friar Tuck roared, "are all fiend and no friar! By St. Dunstan, I'll trounce you, whether you will or not!"

So saying, the friar thrashed the sheriff all round and round the ring, until, completely tired out, he sat flat down on the sward and puffed and blew until his cheeks seemed they must burst.

Bruised, and looking like a whipped cur, Oswald de Burgh lay gnashing his teeth, until Robin Hood ordered him to be raised and the nature of his injuries ascertained.

There were no bones broken, but never had man a sounder thrashing, and never a man so cowed and chap-fallen as the sheriff of Nottingham.

The end was now to come.

"Bring Gaspard's mule hither," Robin Hood said. "and on it tie the miser and sheriff back to back. Then shall they drink to the health of the merry men of Sherwood, and be conducted to the border of the forest."

Gaspard set up a howl, but Oswald de Burgh remained silent. His ignominious position cut him to the quick, but there was much consolation in the fact that his life was spared.

"Oswald de Burgh," Robin Hood said, reading his thoughts, "I have broken my word for a fair lady's sake, who could find it in her heart to cry mercy for even one so base as you! Let me hear that you have mend'd your ways, for I warn you that if through

act of tyranny you fall into my hands again you shall not escape so easily."

The mule was fetched, and having been well fed with corn it was so frisky that it stood on its hind legs and tried to dance.

"The beast is mad!" Gaspard shrieked. "The brute will kill us!"

"Forsooth," said Little John, as he unwound a long rope, "the poor creature is so astonished at having had a good meal that its wits have fled. Steady, Jupiter! Whoa, Mars! What is this mass of bones, held up by four legs, named?"

"I call the mule Greedyjaws," Gaspard replied, shivering with dread.

"My faith! and a good name, too, for master and beast," said Little John. "So up, Sir Daniel Greedyjaws, and you, too, worthy sheriff. The noon is long past, and the day wanes. It will be eventide ere you see the good town of Nottingham."

Tied back to back, and so secured that they could not fall off, Oswald de Burgh and the miser presented a sorry sight.

Then, at a sign from Robin Hood, one of the foresters gave the mule a sharp smack and started it on its journey.

So, with many a jolt and bump, the two degraded men went mile after mile, groaning and blaming each other heartily. The mule entered into the spirit of the situation, and enjoyed it. Here was a cruel master, powerless now to thrash or lash, at the brute's mercy, and another fellow, notorious as a tyrant. Greedyjaws seemed to know it, and even found strength enough to kick up his heels with delight.

"Merciful Heaven! this is more than I can bear," Oswald de Burgh groaned. "To think that I, the sheriff of Nottingham, should be mounted in such a sorry fashion, and tied to a churl!"

"As for that," retorted Gaspard, driven to madness, "I may be a churl, but you have not scrupled to borrow of me, to dip your greedy fingers into my coffers, and to come to me at all times when your extravagance has driven you to such extremities that you could not pay your servants' wages. Oh! oh!

Mercy, all my bones are broken! Greedyjaws, you shall suffer for this!"

"Ah," the mule might have said, "you have made me suffer time and again, but it is my turn now."

And to show that the opportunity had come Greedyjaws rasped Gaspard against the trunk of a tree in such a manner as to remove a strip of skin from his nose.

An hour passed, and where Greedyjaws had taken them neither Gaspard nor De Burgh had the least notion. Hungry, thirsty, jolted, and half dead, they now fought madly to break their bonds. But the more they struggled and strained, the tighter drew the knotted cords.

Presently a poor man, with a bundle of clothing on his back, came walking through the forest.

"Ho, there!" roared Oswald de Burgh.

"Ho, there!" Gaspard squeaked. "Good fellow, come to our aid, I pray you."

The man stared at the odd spectacle, and then began to laugh.

"By St. Bede," he said, "I have never seen the like of this before. You are good company, I trow."

"Good company, villain!" Oswald de Burgh yelled. "I am—"

"I know you," the traveller interrupted, "but it is to no man's credit to do so. Well, continue your journey and rest you merry."

"Unbind us!" bellowed Oswald de Burgh.

"Not I," said the man. "The labourer is worthy of his hire, but no payment could persuade me to lend you a helping hand, tyrant. And as for Gaspard, was it not he who lent my father a few groats, and then had him cast into your own prison, sheriff of Nottingham? Go on, say I. Yonder road leads straight to Nottingham, and such a sight as this will give good sport to the people."

"Will money tempt you to unbind us?" Oswald de Burgh gasped.

"Give it me."

"My hands are bound. But I forgot," replied the sheriff. "That villain,

Robin Hood, took all I possessed. Come to my castle, and I will reward you well."

"Ho! ho!" laughed the man, fixing his bundle firmer on his shoulders, "I know the sort of reward I should get, did I go to your castle."

"Fifty nobles for but a few cuts of your knife," Oswald de Burgh pleaded.

"The very edge would turn blunt out of hatred to you," the man said, scowling, "unless indeed I drew it for some other purpose."

"What! would you murder me?"

"No, I'll not harm you," the man responded. "I am a Saxon, and Saxons do not strike at the weak and defenceless. But if I met you, man to man, in the forest, I'd do my best to rid the world of a monster."

"Quite right," Greedyjaws seemed to say, and then trotted in his most graceful fashion along the road to Nottingham.

Soon they met more people, but Greedyjaws appeared to be in no hurry to get rid of the two wretched men, and certainly no man put himself out to help them.

"I shall be the laughing-stock of the whole place," Oswald de Burgh howled. "Oh, for one of my henchmen to stick his pike into this loathsome beast!"

At last some of his own men did appear, and gave chase, but Greedyjaws treated them to a merry dance until finally brought to a halt by a closed gateway. Then, as the men cut the cords, Oswald de Burgh and Gaspard rolled to the ground and lay panting for breath.

"I'll have the lives of a thousand foresters for this outrage," the sheriff said when he was able to speak. "Now, Gaspard, get hence, and quickly, too, for the sight of you is hateful to me. Ho, there! one of you fellows go forth and kill that brute of a mule."

But Greedyjaws had been wise in his generation and had taken to flight the moment the sheriff and usurer were released.

By this time a great crowd had collected, and now and then a peal of laughter came to Oswald de Burgh's

ears. This proved almost as maddening as his recent troubles, and he vowed that he would have the first man who made sport of him hanged in the open street.

"Look to your own neck, before you trouble yourself so much about ours," came from one in the crowd. "Threatened men live long, and the day will come when there will be law and justice for the poor peasant, as well as for the Norman nobles."

Oswald de Burgh sent a messenger to the castle, and soon a company of men, under an officer, hastened to his relief. The people made way for them silently, but with compressed lips and set teeth. The fire of rebellion was ready to blaze, and Oswald de Burgh trembled.

"Bid these good people go peacefully to their homes," he said. "I seek to do them no harm."

The officer repeated this message word for word, and flung some money into the crowd, but it lay untouched, save by some of the sheriff's toadies, who, raising their caps, shouted:

"Long life to the noble Oswald de Burgh!"

"Ah, shout away, and toss up your greasy caps," said a man. "All the yelping cannot wipe out the defeat that Robin Hood has inflicted on him."

"Defeated, yes," the sheriff said, grating his teeth, "but I'll wipe it all out with a revenge both bitter and terrible!"

CHAPTER 4.

The Tournament, and the Exciting Scenes that Occurred There.

On the following day Robin Hood received news from one of his scouts that a tournament was to be held in London a week hence under the patronage and in the presence of Prince John.

The proclamation made by the herald was full of subtle taunts and insults to the Saxon knights, and it set Robin Hood thinking. More than once he looked at Sir Eustace Alleyne and Sir Edward Thorgood.

"Sir Eustace," he said suddenly, "here is a chance to put Prince John

and his boastful knights to shame. The prince served you a scurvy trick, and here lies your opportunity to revenge yourself for it. You, too, Sir Edward, have suffered at the hands of the usurper."

"Half my estates were taken from me, and the others are so heavily taxed that I scarcely care whether I return," Sir Edward replied. "Luckily, my sire buried his treasure, or I should be in as bad a state as the rascally miser you sent away with Oswald de Burgh."

"Then," said Robin Hood, "I see no reason why some of us should not go to the tournament. Greet Mars! how well our noble friar would look in a full suit of armour."

"We have the very thing for him," Little John said, exploding with laughter. "It is borrowed harness, but Friar Tuck will not object to that. I faith! if he couche a lance as well as he wields a quarter-staff, the Saxons will take all prizes."

Long they talked of the project of a small party going to the London tournament, and finding no difficulties that could not be surmounted, one and all agreed that the thing should be done. It was necessary that they should travel slowly, to avoid overmuch observation, so those who were to go started the next night.

The sun rose brightly upon London six days later. It was the morning fixed for the tournament, and each house was empty at an early hour, save in the line of the procession, which would soon wend its way to the lists.

True, the people regretted the absence of Richard the Lion-Hearted, but they comforted themselves with the reflection that he would soon be in their midst again, and were willing to receive Prince John right royally.

At Smithfield the open space for the gorgeous display was flanked by pavilions of various colours, a royal enclosure, and galleries for the rich. Presently all preparations were completed, and then, in the midst of a sea of gleaming lances and waving plumes, Prince John advanced, attended by the noblest in the land.

The horse he rode was white, adorned with trappings of scarlet and gold, and over his armour of polished steel the prince wore a surcoat of white silk, richly embroidered with the arms of England. Around his open helmet was a gold coronet, encrusted with large rubies and diamonds.

As he made his way to the royal enclosure, he raised himself in the stirrups and cried:

"God save King Richard, and send him a safe return!"

With one voice the people took up the words and gave a shout which rolled through the quaint streets of the City of London like thunder. But as the sound died away a voice cried:

"When the king returns he will have much to forgive his brother!"

If a thunderbolt had fallen it could not have created more consternation than did that cry. A deathly silence followed for a brief space; then everyone began talking at once, demanding each of his neighbour who was the bold knave who could so brave Prince John's displeasure.

A number of soldiers ran hither and thither in the hope of finding the disturber, but failing to do so returned to their places. The prince was white with rage, but there was nothing for it but to let the matter drop, and so he sat himself down in the royal chair.

Then the signal was given for the heralds to declare the laws of the tournament, the principal of which were as follow:

First. Five challengers were to encounter all comers.

Secondly. Any knight might select an antagonist from among these five challengers by touching his shield; if with the butt of his lance, the lances were to be blunted by a piece of round, flat wood; but if the shield were touched by the pointed end, the combatants were to fight with sharp weapons as in actual battle.

Thirdly. When the challengers had each broken five of their opponents' lances, the victor was to be declared by the Queen of Beauty, and an embroidered scarf put by her round his neck.

With this prize also went a war-horse of superb action.

The heralds having gone through the proclamation, they retired, and immediately the challenging knights hung their quaintly-devised shields outside their tents. After which, amid a blare of trumpets and a cloud of dust, the five knights dashed into the arena, and a mock battle took place, merely to amuse the spectators.

"Now, by the splendour of Heaven!" cried Prince John, when no antagonists appeared against the challengers, "it seems that the day will end but tamely. Is there a decay of martial spirit, or do the dames of England lack the transcendent beauty that animated the jousts of former days? Herald, announce again, so that even the groundlings may hear!"

"Love of ladies!" shouted the herald. "Splintering of lances! Stand forth, gallant knights! Fair ladies look upon your deeds!"

"Ho, there, De Bracy!" cried the prince, as one of the challengers rode by. "Can you find no man to pit himself against you? No boastful Saxon, ever crying of his wrongs and deeds? By the light of Our Lady's brow! it was well when the land went from them."

Prince John's words were answered by the sound of a horn, the notes of which died away before the direction they came from could be discovered.

"Open the barriers!" cried a voice. "A gallant knight rides hither to take up the challenge!"

The knight in question was tall and slim. He wore a suit of Milan armour, and on his shield he bore the device of a riven oak. He was mounted on a coal-black horse, and his visor was closed so that none could see his face. As he passed through the lists he saluted the prince by lowering his lance.

The newcomer was hailed by the cheers of the multitude, and advancing towards Ranulf de Bracy, he struck the sharp end of his lance upon De Bracy's shield until it rang again.

"Who are you," demanded De Bracy, fiercely, "that are so tired of your life?"

"I am one," replied the knight, "who trusts this day to leave you no more of your stolen lands than shall serve you for a grave."

"Then take your last look at the sun," De Bracy cried, "for your hours are numbered."

Ranulf de Bracy, retiring to the end of the lists, changed his horse, and, receiving a fresh lance and shield from his gaily-attired esquire, wheeled quickly round.

The trumpets sounded, the knights rushed at each other with tremendous speed, and met halfway in the lists with the shock of a thunderbolt.

De Bracy's lance came so fairly in contact with his opponent's shield that the lance went to pieces and the unknown knight reeled in the saddle.

"De Bracy! De Bracy!" shouted the people. "The God of battles guides his hand."

The conflict, however, was far from being at an end. At the next tilt the unknown knight struck with such unerring aim, and so forcibly, that the shock was irresistible.

The girths of De Bracy's horse burst, and saddle, man, and steed rolled on the ground, and the unknown knight was declared the victor.

The people acclaimed him with lusty shouts, and while their cries filled the air the unknown knight looked for fresh antagonists. An esquire was leading Oswald de Burgh's horse up and down. His shield hung at the saddle-bow, and the unknown knight touched it with the point of his lance.

"A murrain seize the bold fellow!" Oswald de Burgh growled under his breath. "He has made such short work of De Bracy that I fear he will unhorse me at the first tilt, if not indeed send the point of his lance through a joint of my armour."

But Ranulf de Bracy put Oswald de Burgh at his ease for the time being by demanding to be allowed to try his skill again.

"Noble prince," he cried, almost overcome with rage and vexation, "I pray you send me not from the lists.

See! I am unhurt. Had not the girths burst I should have been hailed as conqueror."

"What says the unknown?" demanded Prince John.

"Why not inquire into his quality?" Oswald de Burgh whisp red in his royal master's ear. "For all your highness knows, he may be an imposter."

"Nay," replied the prince. "To question him now would but incense the people. My faith! he who can handle a lance in such a fashion is no commoner. What!" he added, laughing, "are you still thinking of Robin Hood? Well, no wonder, after your uncomfortable ride through Sherwood Forest."

Oswald de Burgh muttered something that the prince did not understand, or the sheriff of Nottingham would have lost some favour at Court. The matter was settled by the unknown knight riding close to the royal pavilion.

"Far be it from my wish to take Ranulf de Bracy at a disadvantage," he cried. "Here I am, and my answer to his complaints shall be at the point of my lance."

"By the splendour of Paradise, you are a true and gallant knight," said the prince, "a dwell worthy of the chivalry of England."

"Ah! your royal highness," the knight replied, "it is easy to praise the deeds of one you do not know."

"Who are you?" asked the prince, leaning forward. "Speak low and quickly. I swear by the rood to keep your secret."

"I am Sir Eustace Alleyne," came the reply. "Prince, methinks you have heard that name too often."

Prince John started, and for some moments was quite unable to speak. Only too well he remembered how he had plotted to have Alleyne murdered by Oswald de Burgh.

"You shall have audience with me when the sports are finished," he said at length. "I know what is in your mind, and—"

"Nay," Sir Eustace interrupted, "I have done with the Court until my king returns. Had it not been for Robin

Hood, my bones would be rotting under the earth. For the sake of the honour of the great name you bear, say no more."

By this time Ranulf de Bracy, having been equipped with another horse and a fresh lance, was ready to continue the conflict, but Prince John sat like a statue, deaf and blind to all things, a victim to his own shame and perfidy.

It was not until the trumpets sounded, and the fierce De Bracy shouted, "A outrance! Death before dishonour!" that he roused himself and took the slightest interest in the proceedings.

He saw as in a dream the two mail-clad horsemen meet with a crash like the snapping of a tree. There was a cloud of dust, and as it cleared away the people gave vent to their feelings in a lusty shout. Only one horseman remained in the saddle. Ranulf de Bracy lay pierced through his helmet and breathing his last.

The esquires and marshals hurried his quivering body from the arena, and the trumpets sounded Sir Eustace Alleyne's victory.

"Heaven help me!" Oswald de Burgh said aloud. "Must I measure lances with this man?"

"Wait!" replied the prince, scornfully. "We will see if he touches your shield again."

It seemed, however, that Sir Eustace received some kind of signal, for, apparently satisfied with what he had done, he bowed in turn to the prince and the lady impersonating the Queen of Beauty, and rode straight out of the lists.

"Sire," said Queen Eleanor, turning to the prince, "it were a pity to let so noble a knight depart and know so little of him."

"My royal mother," Prince John replied, "I have his name and quality, and I am sworn not to reveal it. Now," looking at his tablets, on which a sort of programme was written—"now, Oswald de Burgh, it is your turn to act as challenger for the good shire of Nottingham."

Oswald de Burgh, being assisted into

the saddle, careered up and down bravely enough.

He was more feared than loved, but having made himself immensely rich by land-grabbing and sweating the poor of his district out of their goods and money, and having the ear of the prince to boot, he felt certain that no Norman knight would seek to engage him in a dangerous conflict.

As he raised his lance the trumpets sounded, and to the astonishment of all there rode into the lists an extraordinary figure which brought a roar of laughter from the crowd.

Both the queen dowager and Prince John burst out laughing, and the Queen of Beauty put her hands before her face to hide her merriment.

The newcomer was mounted on a tall, bony horse, which, unlike the carefully protected mounts of the knights, had no armour but a rough-looking spike affixed to its head.

The rider of the steed seemed almost as broad as he was long. His body was covered with plates of rusty steel, and on his head was an enormous helmet, the visor of which looked like the model of a portcullis.

On his left arm he bore a shield, the device of which was a pair of stag antlers, and in his right hand he carried a long pole, hollowed out at the butt, so as to afford a good grip.

Never had such a ridiculous figure been seen at any tournament, and the people swayed and reeled about in the very abandonment of their mirth.

The unwieldy knight took not the slightest notice of the sensation he was causing, but rode gravely round the lists, and having bowed to the royal party, halted before Oswald de Burgh and made a lunge with the pole.

Whether by design or accident, he missed the shield, and caught Oswald de Burgh a sounding thwack on the side of his head.

This completely dabol'd Prince John up, and shrieking with laughter he nearly fell out of his royal seat.

"By my halidom! this would make the longest-faced priest throw aside his beads and forget that he ever trod the

flagstones of a cloister," the prince cried, as tears ran freely down his face. "At him, Oswald de Burgh! Make short work of him!"

"This is no knight, but a mummer or a jester in disguise," Oswald de Burgh replied, in a disgusted tone of voice. "Away, clown, or the people shall see if there be any brains in that tub you call a head!"

"Clown in your teeth, proud knight," retorted the fat horseman. "I will have you to know that my birth is better than your own. My sires were gentles when yours were hog wards."

"Am I to suffer this, prince?" Oswald de Burgh cried, shaking with fury.

"The insult accompanies the challenge," Prince John replied. "Forget you that you were the first to—ha, ha, ha!—call the noble—ha, ha, ha!—knight names?"

"He did, most noble prince," put in the newcomer; "and, by the bones of the ass that frightened Balaam, I will poke him through the ribs for so doing."

Again the trumpets sounded, but Prince John began to see that the farce had gone far enough, for Oswald de Burgh, shut up in his steel harness, became so enraged that he could hardly sit his saddle.

"Sir Unwieldy!" the prince exclaimed, addressing the man creating so much fun, "come hither, and tell me what pretensions you have to knighthood."

"I am Gilbert, a knight of St. John of Jerusalem," was the reply, "and with me I have my parchment, signed and sealed by his eminence the cardinal."

"Then, by my faith," said the prince, "you have a right to pick up the gauntlet and fight, so long as you conform to the laws of the tournament."

The trumpets sounded for the third time, and the sheriff of Nottingham, mad with fury, wheeled his horse round and charged at his opponent.

But to his further chagrin, and the astonishment of the assembly, the fat knight's pole struck under Sir Oswald de Burgh's throat, and not only lifted

his casque clean off his head, but left him gasping for breath.

"Well done!" Prince John replied. "There is not a knight in all my brother's army who could have struck better."

Oswald de Burgh let out a bellow of fury.

"As it seems that I am to be made sport of," he cried bitterly, "I may as well retire and bear my vexation as best I may."

"No, no," exclaimed his bulky antagonist, "I claim another tilt—ay, and another after that, unless one or the other of us is put hors de combat. Come on, valiant knight! Get you another casque, or you shall fight without one."

The people, having laughed until their sides ached, could laugh no more, and silence fell upon the scene as, after a short absence, Oswald de Burgh came out freshly equipped.

"By the thunder of Jove!" he muttered, grinding his teeth, "this fellow shall not escape! Once he is on the ground my horse shall trample upon him."

Prince John was in a mischievous mood; for, of course, only a signal was needed from him to stop such an exhibition.

The other knights, rejoicing at seeing Oswald de Burgh taken down, came out of their pavilions to watch the fun, and grew uncomfortably warm in their armour as their peals of laughter rang out unrestrained.

Gilbert, of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, although conscious of having heaped ridicule on the head of the Sheriff of Nottingham, took matters pretty coolly, and he had waited patiently until Oswald de Burgh was re-equipped.

The people knew that a climax was at hand. They scarcely breathed as the fierce Norman, stung to madness by the taunts that fell like hail on his ears, dashed at his portly antagonist.

"Ah—h—h!" cried the prince. "By Pluto, Oswald de Burgh has him now..."

It really seemed that Gilbert the Fat would be lifted out of the saddle; but

lo! round went his long-legged steed, and De Burgh, missing his aim and losing his balance, shot clean over his horse's head.

He was still in the air when Gilbert gave him a sounding crack with the pole. And as De Burgh lay all of a heap on the ground, cursing the attendants for not carrying him away quickly, the stout victor rode sedately up to the Queen of Beauty and made her such a profound bow as seemed likely to break his neck.

"Gramercy! Sir Knight," said Prince John; "but you have done your devoir right bravely, and methinks you have a heart as stout as your body. We will give you a prize. Ho, there, marshal, present to this good knight the spare horse brought hither for our use."

Two grooms in royal livery led a magnificent charger into the lists, and Gilbert mounted quickly.

"By my halidom," he said. "Glad enough am I to make this exchange. The poor brute I have parted with belongs to mine host of the 'Saracen's Head,' and I pray you, noble prince, to have him sent back."

"How?" exclaimed Prince John, elevating his eyebrows. "A knight tourneys with an innkeeper's horse? Sir, I demand proof of your quality."

"I am what I said," was the reply. "Truly, I am a knight, but of the church militant, and Gilbert was the name I received when I took my vows."

"Now, by St. George," rejoined the prince angrily, "this smells of mystery and suspicion. You will attend us at our palace at eight of the clock, and bear in mind that you fail not, nor make an attempt to leave London. We have not time to go into the matter now, as the sports must not be delayed. Let the lists be cleared, and the gallant knight prove themselves worthy."

Other bouts followed quickly; but at last the tournament came to an end. The procession was again marshalled, and, preceded by heralds, moved away amidst the braying of clarions and trumpets.

Each victorious knight came in for a full share of the plaudits of the people,

but he who had worsted Oswald de Burgh was not among the number.

He had slipped away from the lists to merry Islington with a few admiring companions.

His first thought was to get rid of the enormous helmet, and it was Robin Hood, disguised as a well-to-do citizen of London, who removed it, and laughed in the round, jovial face of no other than good old Friar Tuck.

CHAPTER 5.

The Fight at the "Saracen's Head."

"My faith!" said Robin Hood. "But you did wrong to let Prince John into your secret. He will guess that you are lodged at the 'Saracen's Head,' and he will not forget to send for you."

"And, by St. Benedict, his men will have a pretty dance before they think of coming as far as Islington," Friar Tuck replied. "Of 'Saracen's Heads' there are fully a score in London. The sign has become quite a fashion with tapsters."

The room in which they were sitting overlooked a fine stretch of Middlesex country, for Islington in those days was merely a village. At Robin Hood's desire, Sir Eustace Aliye had lodged himself in more convenient quarters, and arranged a place of meeting on the following day.

Friar Tuck was the hero of the hour, and Robin Hood and the foresters who had accompanied him to London seemed never to tire of slapping the jovial friar on his shoulders.

Darkness set in; the supper ordered for the guests of the inn was being prepared, and the house was filled with appetising odours. It came to the table none too soon, and the girl who waited on the hilarious party kept running in and out of the room, and looking point-blank at the men, especially at the handsome Robin Hood and the portly Friar Tuck.

News travelled slowly then, but the fame of the outlaws and the vagaries of a friar who preferred the shelter of either cave or tree to cloister and cell, had reached London; and the story lost

none by its being handed from mouth to mouth.

All sorts of stories were afloat. Some gave Robin Hood credit for what he really was—the redresser of wrongs, the terror of rich tyrants, and an open-handed friend to the poor. Other accounts described him as a heartless monster, and Friar Tuck no other than the devil, disguised in cowl and cassock.

"Where is mine host?" Robin Hood presently demanded of the waiting girl.

"Business has taken him to Barnet."

"I wish him a safe and pleasant journey home," said Robin. "It matters not, as the bill can be settled in the morning."

Will Scarlet leaned forward and whispered to his friends:

"Does it not seem strange to you that the host should leave such company, and be away so late?"

"Beyond a doubt it does, Will," Robin Hood replied. "Listen to me! The girl is unhappy in her mind, and her lips tremble with words she dare not utter. She is young and pretty; you, too, are young and not ill-favoured. Go outside, Will, and flatter her. Tell her she is lovely, and that you cannot live without her. And, by my faith! she will loosen her secret, even if her life hangs upon it."

"You have set me a pretty task," Will Scarlet replied, laughing. "I am but a poor hand at love-making. Once I whispered softly into a maiden's ear, and red finger-marks reminded me of it for a fortnight."

"Try yet again; you will succeed this time."

As soon as supper was over, Will Scarlet strolled to the door and stood gazing at the stars, over which a filmy whiteness was spreading.

Hearing the girl passing, he turned and spoke to her, but to his surprise he found that she was in tears.

"What ails you, little one?" Will demanded. "A woman's sob is like a dagger at my heart."

The girl passed him quickly, but found time to whisper a few words into his ear.

"Go to the stable-yard," she said; "and I will join you there."

Will Scarlet strolled to the appointed place, and having looked sharply round and loosened his sword in case of sudden attack, he possessed himself of patience and waited.

In about a quarter of an hour he saw the girl coming towards him.

"Sweetheart," he said, somewhat clumsily, as he opened his arms. "beauty in distress is terrible to me. Why do you sob as if your heart would break?"

"I shed no tears for myself," the girl rejoined. "Will you trust me—trust me so far as to tell me who your friends are?"

"Rest happy in the assurance that they are good men and true."

"So I believe. I weep for them and you. Sir, the landlord has set forth on an errand of treachery."

Will Scarlet started, but said nothing for fear of spoiling such a chance of learning news so important to the welfare of his companions.

"The Holy Virgin give me courage to tell you," the girl continued. "Master Denys, my hard taskmaster, has gone to fetch the band."

"What band? Stay, what is your name, little one?"

"Martha; I know of no other," the girl answered.

"Then say on, Martha, and the saints bless you for having said so much."

"My master ~~suspects~~ that Robin Hood, the man there is so much talk of, is in the house. If not, he is sure that the guests are rich. Oh, wretched men, to let a grab-all like Denys see the glitter of gold!"

"Yes, yes; but what of the band?" asked the forester.

"Men who will steal here in the dead of night, and attack you as you lie in your beds," Martha replied. "I had orders to drugged the wine, but I am innocent of that."

Accustomed as Will Scarlet was to danger, the news staggered him, and remaining silent he again let Martha talk on.

"You must pretend to be dreamy

when Denys returns," she continued. "Order in such wine as you require, but drink none from his hands."

"You are a brave little woman, and I love you really now," Will Scarlet said. "We are only six in number, and have not brought such weapons as we are accustomed to use. How many do the band muster?"

"Denys will bring a score at the least."

"The saints defend us!" Will Scarlet said. "It seems to me that we had better go. But what will become of you after we are gone?"

"Denys will kill me. But think not of me. My life is nothing. I am alone and friendless in the world."

"Not so alone and friendless as you think," Will Scarlet replied, drawing her closer to him. "Martha, I know of a place where you will be safe and held in respect. You shall go with us. But I must waste no more words. I'll hasten back to my master and tell him all."

"And is your master really Robin Hood?"

"He is a man of gentle birth," Will Scarlet responded, fencing the question, "and loves fair play. He would not harm a worm that lay in his path; yet is he ready to fight like a giant of old for the cause of freedom. Now tell me —how are these men armed?"

"Swords, daggers, and keen-edged axes. One they call the Ogre uses an axe with terrible effect," Martha replied, putting her hand before her eyes, as if to shut out some horrible vision.

"The Ogre! What manner of man is he?"

"A giant, black-blooded and cruel. He is well named."

"Oh that Little John were here!" Will Scarlet muttered under his breath.

"Have you no friends in London?" Martha asked.

"None but yourself. Now pay attention. We have our swords, and my stout comrade has his quarter-staff. Can you provide us with some bows and shafts? There should be such things in a house like this."

"I know of a cross-bow and bolts," Martha replied. "They belonged to a fair, comely gentleman who tarried too long in his journey. Denys and the band came and—"

"Yes, I understand. Martha, if my comrades elect to stay, place the cross-bow and bolts in the room which I share with the tall, bearded man."

"Him they call by the name of Carter?"

"The same," Will Scarlet replied. "You have quick ears, my little one. Now get within, and when you return to the room, watch me. If I place my hand on my head thus, we stay; but if I drum my knuckles on the table, we go; and though there were a hundred bands, each of a hundred score, you shall quit the place and know happier times."

Martha did not repulse him when he tilted her face to his and kissed her, and, though tears were flowing from her eyes, she looked brighter and happier, and seemed loth to leave the young forester.

"Go," Will said—"go, and quickly. Perchance one of the band may come in advance to take stock of us."

Martha kilted up her gown to run. In a few minutes Will Scarlet followed, and entering the room where his comrades sat, told Robin Hood all.

"We will stay," the outlaw said calmly. "As for this girl Martha, you did right to promise her a peaceful home, Will. Marion wants a suitable companion, and here is one made for her."

"But we are six, and they will number a score."

"We must think that we number a score, and they only six," Robin Hood rejoined. "Now see to it all. We are to be drowsy, yet as wide awake as weasels. By my sweetheart, who perchance is dreaming of her absent lover, we will teach Denys, the Ogre, and the pack of scum at their heels a lesson. I feared the host had set forth to bring soldiers, but as we shall have only to deal with murderers, who are at their hearts worse than cowards, I snap my fingers. Ho, there!" hammering on

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the table. "A bottle of wine, and then we drink no more to-night."

Martha brought the wine, moving about the room with downcast eyes, and no man spoke a word to her. Will Scarlet, leaning back in his chair, yawned, and laid the flat of his hand on the top of his head.

Martha saw the signal, and understood it. For a moment her face flushed and her hands trembled, but that was all. As she went out, Denys, the land'ord, came stamping in.

"Gentles," he said, noticing with satisfaction that they looked tired, "I pray you excuse me for running away from such good customers, but I have been to sell a horse at a good profit, and it behoves a man to look well after his purse at all times."

"So it does," Robin Hood assented. "And since short reckonings make long friendship, suppose I pay the bill up to the present, and settle for the rest in the morning? The good girl," yawning heavily, "will tell you what she has served us, and then," yawning again, "of a truth, I care not how soon I lift up my heels and jump into bed."

The landlord went out, and soon returned with the reckoning. Robin Hood dashed his hand into his purse, and throwing two golden nobles on the table said:

"Divide the change between the girl, who has waited so well on us, and the ostler, who has, doubtless, looked as well to our steeds. And now to bed. Come one, come all. Good-night, mine host."

The chambers engaged for the King of Sherwood and his followers were situated at the end of a long corridor, ending in a wall with no window or outlet. Into the largest room the six stole, and a short council of war was held.

It was arranged that, as soon as the house was apparently still, Will Scarlet should creep downstairs and discover what was going on.

Martha had gone, no one knew whither. Perchance to her own chamber, where she sat trembling and listening. At all events, she had not forgotten to place the cross-bow and a

dozen steel-pointed bolts in Will's room, and after waiting about half an hour he slipped off his boots and stole as noiselessly as a prowling cat along the corridor.

It was so dark that he was compelled to feel every inch of the way. To slip or stumble might prove fatal. At length, to his great relief, he reached the stair-head and leaned over the balustrade.

A light glimmered faintly below, and the sound of voices, muffled and indistinct, came to him.

Will Scarlet crept still lower down until he reached the floor leading to the kitchen. The door was ajar, the light streamed through it, and Will Scarlet peered into the room.

The night was warm, but a great fire was burning on the hearth. Crouched round it, two deep, were at least twenty men, the flames flashing on their hideous faces. The Ogre was there. No mistake could be made in him. Tall, massive, brutal, ugly, he was like the embodiment of a dreadful nightmare.

Will Scarlet strained his ears to catch what the rascals were saying.

"What of that girl?" he heard one of the wretches ask.

"Oh, she counts with the rest," Denys, the landlord, replied brutally. "But let her be the last to go. One scream, and the quarry would take flight."

The wretches chuckled, and, waiting to hear but a few sentences more, Will Scarlet stole back to his comrades.

In less than two minutes a plan of defence was arranged. Will Scarlet was to act as advance guard with the cross-bow, and behind him Friar Tuck, ready with his quarter-staff, and then Robin and the other three to be ready with drawn swords.

Only three men abreast could pass along the corridor, so the cross-bow promised to do great execution before the miscreants could get ready for their foul work.

Nearly an hour passed away—only sixty minutes, but it seemed an age. The ruffians downstairs grew bolder, and talked in louder keys with some

impatience. They were drawing lots to see who should go first.

"They will soon be coming now," said Robin Hood, with a sigh of relief. "Friar Tuck, are you ready to receive them?"

"Ay," came the low reply. "Truly, I have done enough to-day for a man of peace. Yet methinks I shall get in some hard knocks. St. Nicholas! what a noise they make!"

"They count us all drugged and sound asleep," said Robin Hood.

Presently there came the sound of half-smothered laughter.

"The Ogre has drawn the lucky number," the watchers heard one of the miscreants say.

"That means," Robin Hood whispered, "you will have to deal with him first. Put a bolt right between his eyes."

"If I can see them," Will Scarlet replied. "What if I miss him?"

"I must try my luck then," Friar Tuck remarked. "Keep close to the wall, my merry Will, so that I shall not tumble over you if I have need to make a rush at this son of evil."

"Hush!" cautioned Robin Hood. "Not another word. The villains are coming."

Outside the rising wind moaned and soughed, filling the house with ghostly rustlings. Then the thick wooden stairs began to creak. The murderers were coming, bringing no light with them.

On they came, crawling and creeping with infinite caution; the Ogre first, with a sprawling hand to one of his great overlapping ears.

Will Scarlet raised the crossbow slowly and released the string.

There was a howl of anguish, and then a sound as though a heavy body had fallen backwards.

In a moment all was confusion.

"Lights! Lights!" one of the assassins roared. "We have no easy work before us. The wine was not drugged! The girl has betrayed us!"

"Peace, fool!" returned the landlord. "Let us silence these fellows, and then I

promised you that the wench shall suffer for not obeying my orders. She shall die by inches."

Twang went the crossbow again and there was another scream of anguish, followed by the rushing of feet down the stairs.

Unnerved by the messengers of death that came out of the darkness, the villains had fled.

"Now is our time," whispered Robin Hood. "We will attack them while they are in a state of doubt and confusion."

"But not in the dark, surely," said Friar Tuck. "We shall run the risk of killing each other."

"They have gone to the kitchen," Will Scarlet said. "There is plenty of light there."

"Then come," cried Robin Hood. "I'll lead the way. Will, my brave boy, keep your eyes open for any straggler, and prove to him that a bolt in the stomach is not good for him."

Pausing only long enough to get into some sort of formation, the foresters rushed down the staircase and into the kitchen. Already the Ogre had been put out of the fight by the arrow from Will Scarlet's crossbow, and the remainder of the band were filled with confusion and little prepared for the determined attack of the men they thought to best so easily.

Friar Tuck's quarter-staff, having full play, went to work in terrible earnest. Men went down before it as though they were reeds planted loosely in the ground, and the foresters' swords, gleaming here and there like streaks of lightning, struck death and confusion among the miscreants.

Hampering each other's movements, the rascals ran hither and thither; but at last one got open the door leading to the back of the inn, and rushed out. Others followed, leaving only the dead to point the story of their defeat.

And now Robin Hood and those who had fought so bravely at his side stood like statues in the red firelight, panting, pale, somewhat sick at heart, but covered with glory and victory.

At one end of the kitchen was a heavy curtain, drawn across a row of shelves. The folds began to move, and Robin Hood, gathering them in his arms, revealed the form of a man.

No need to look twice at the wretch to name him.

"Why, it is our worthy host!" Friar Tuck exclaimed.

"None other," said Robin Hood, smiling grimly. "Up, you craven dog, and be quick about it!"

"Oh, sirs," gasped the landlord, white to the lips, "Heaven be thanked for sending you here to-night! The villains came upon me like a swarm of bees. I guessed not their dread errand, or I would have sent for assistance."

"I am a man of peace," quoth Friar Tuck, "yet my soul thirsteth to thrust this quarter-staff down the throat of this lying villain!"

"Poor innocent," sneered Robin Hood, spurning the landlord until he staggered to his feet; "you shall have your full measure of justice, fear not. Where is the girl? In which part of the house is she bestowed?"

"Girl! Oh, Heaven, kick me no more! Girl! girl! What girl?"

"Martha, the girl who waited on us—who warned us of the coming of the band."

Before the craven landlord could make reply the minds of the foresters were set at ease, for Martha came running into the room, and Will Scarlet received her in his arms.

"By St. George, many a true word is spoken in jest!" Robin Hood said. "I asked Will to pretend love-making; but it seems to me that he made love in good earnest. Fetch down that rope," pointing to one hanging over a beam.

Denys dropped on his knees, and his teeth began to chatter in his head.

"Be patient," Robin Hood said. "You shall have yet time to say your prayers, if you can remember any. I'll not pain a woman with the sight of your hanging, though it would be but a fitting punishment for such a knave."

A wailing cry of relief came from the

landlord's lips. He grovelled at the forester's feet, babbling out a string of sentences meant to show his gratitude for the mercy promised him. He even tried to clutch Robin Hood's hand and kiss it, an act which caused the King of Sherwood to contemptuously fling the wretch from him.

"Have peace, cowardly rascal," Robin Hood cried. "Though I will hang you not, yet have I another treat in store for thee."

He turned and spoke a few words in a whisper to his followers, and a minute or so later Friar Tuck was busy with Will Scarlet binding the rascally landlord hand and foot. In such good manner was the work done that Denys could not move a muscle without suffering torture from the rope which held him.

While this was proceeding Robin Hood engaged himself in writing on the walls, with a piece of charred wood, a brief description of what had occurred, bidding all wayfarers beware of sheltering at that inn.

Under this notice the unhappy landlord was placed; and so they left him to the mercy of his own thoughts and of any who might find him.

Then, with Will Scarlet's arm about the waist of the sobbing Martha, the band trooped silently from the inn and made their way towards the stables where their horses were housed. Dispatch was necessary, lest the remnant of the band of defeated murderers should return with others to renew the attack.

CHAPTER 6.

Hoi for Sherwood.

The ostler of the so-called inn had fled and the stable doors were locked; but a few blows from an axe made them yie'd.

The horses had not been tampered with, it evidently being the intention of the band of miscreants to make profit by selling them as soon as they had disposed of the travellers.

"My faith!" said Friar Tuck, as he gazed at the prize steed which Prince John had given him; "such an animal

is not for a man of my build. Take him, Robin."

"Not I," Robin Hood replied. "Mount and away! Come, let us have no more tarrying."

Will Scarlet, with Martha mounted on a useful horse, were already off the premises, but soon they came riding back.

"What now?" demanded Robin Hood.

"Soldiers!" Will Scarlet said. "Prince John is not to be denied. He has sent his men, and they have found the right 'Saracen's Head' at last."

"This looks not promising," Robin Hood replied; "but as we carry little armour, we may be able to show them clean heels. Who leads these men?"

"A man in Milan mail."

"'Tis Oswald de Burgh, I'll be bound," Robin Hood said, "and eager he is to capture us that he may soothe the bruises given him by Friar Tuck. But go on. To wait here would be madness."

The night was now fine and clear, and moonlight glittered on the armour of the score of soldiers trotting along. They were yet nearly a quarter of a mile away, giving the small party of outlaws a good start. The soldiers saw the foresters, however, and sent up a shout that rang through the village of Islington.

Away and away at a gallop went Robin Hood and his comrades until Highgate Hill was reached; and then slowly. At the top they rested, and looked down.

"Our friends in royal livery have not gained on us an inch," Robin Hood said. "Methinks we can laugh at them now; but it is never well to halloo until you are out of the wood. 'Tis a pity we could not bring our bows with us, or we might have given yonder fellows reason to lag still further behind."

Luckily, their horses had been well fed and carried them well; but Robin Hood was in no hurry, so long as he could keep the pursuers at a reasonable distance.

On the other hand, Oswald de Burgh, thinking that he had made sure of his

quarry, was just as determined not to give up the chase. Oh, if he could but capture Robin Hood and Friar Tuck there should be no mincing matters on his part—no delay, no wasting time in listening to explanations. There were plenty of sturdy trees on the roadside, and the men he hated should hang.

Besides, it was necessary that Oswald de Burgh should do something to regain his prestige. Prince John was laughing secretly at him, and the knights were jeering and gibing at the trouncing he had received at the hands of a fat, unwieldy man.

Passing down the Great North Road, Robin Hood diverted his course to Finchley, and then on to Hendon.

As luck would have it, one of his men was well acquainted with the locality, and after traversing a number of lanes, the outlaw, selecting a wood, led the way into it.

Calling a halt, Robin Hood then proceeded to carry out a plan which he had decided upon.

Making a few alterations in his appearance, borrowing a cap here and a jerkin there, he put on the look of an innocent countryman, and sallied forth, bent on playing a dangerous trick on his foe.

Soon after, Oswald de Burgh and his men came clattering along, and very imposing and warlike in the moonlight they looked.

"Gramercy!" cried Robin Hood, in the dialect of a yokel. "What be these? Be there another war broke out, that men come clad in steel harness at the dead of night?"

Oswald de Burgh pulled up his horse, steaming and foaming from mouth to flank.

"How now, fellow?" he said, leaning forward and peering into Robin's face. "Who are you that prowl about at such a time?"

"Well may you ask, gallant sir," Robin replied. "I'm London bound, but the saints preserve me, for I seem to be as far away as when I started from Barnet. A fool put me on the wrong track, and here I be, footsore, weary and hungry."

"What is your name?" Oswald de Burgh demanded.

"Wykesoken—Bill Wykesoken."

"Where do you live?"

"When I am at home I live with father," Robin Hood responded, with an innocent grin.

"Stupid varlet! Where lives your father?"

"He lives with mother."

"By all the gods of war, saw ever anyone such ignorance as these Saxons have!" Oswald de Burgh exclaimed. "Addlepated loon, I ask again where do you all live?"

"Why, you see, we all live together," said Robin; "and that's what I told them five men and a maid who asked me for a near cut to Watbridge."

"Oh, they did, did they?" said Oswald de Burgh, pricking up his ears.

"Ay, they did," Robin replied, still grinning. "And they ses, ses they, 'If so be anyone asks if you've seen us, tell 'em no. But—by St. Dunstan!—how tired and hungry I be!'

"Show us the way they went, and I'll give you a silver crown for your trouble," said Oswald de Burgh.

"I don't think I be so tired as not to earn that," Robin Hood rejoined. And then, in a burst of confidence: "Why, I ain't seen a silver crown since my father sold his score o' hogs to the good Prior of Barnet Abbey."

"Give him the crown, and tell him to lead the way," said Oswald de Burgh to the man riding at his side.

Robin Hood received the crown; then he acted promptly.

"You just follow me, and I'll show you the way they took," he said. "Come along, gallant sir; and gramercy for the silver crown. When I get back from London town I'll buy a score o' hogs, and laugh at father."

A pretty dance did Robin Hood lead Oswald de Burgh and his men, over fields of thick clover and tall grass ripe for the scythe. As their horses stumbled and floundered, they vented their wrath in coarse words not only upon the guide but upon Robin Hood, Friar Tuck, and the prince that sent them on such an errand.

At length Robin Hood stopped, and waiting until a bank of clouds drifted over the face of the moon, he shaded his eyes with his hand and cried:

"There they go! There they go!"

"Hush, fool! Not so much noise!" Oswald de Burgh whispered hoarsely. "Where are the varlets? I see nothing but rough hedges, bushes, and stunted trees."

"That's because your eyes are not so good as mine," Robin Hood said in effect. "Why, they're skulking behind them very trees you talk of."

"Forward, men!" cried Oswald de Burgh. "Out with your swords, and don't forget to let your steel bite well. We have them at last! I feel that my hands are on Robin Hood's throat!"

With a roar and a rush they swept past Robin Hood, who, convulsed with suppressed laughter, threw himself on the ground, and then raised himself on his elbow. He knew what was about to happen.

Suddenly there came a loud splash, followed by the gurgling cry: "Halt!"

Too late! Such horses as the men rode could not be stopped in a moment, and into a hollow filled with mud and water they tumbled, throwing some of the men, and getting hopelessly fixed.

Oswald de Burgh was the first to tumble out of the saddle, and, standing up to his armpits in water, he raved until he was black in the face.

Robin Hood strolled quietly up.

"If thou wilt give me another silver crown, I'll try to help thee out," he said, bursting into a hearty roar of laughter.

"Varlet and villain!" Oswald de Burgh yelled. "Your neck shall be stretched as long as your body for this. Vulgar hound, you have led us purposely into this trap."

"Come, come!" said Robin Hood, dropping the countryman and speaking in his cultured voice, "I pray you, do not lose your temper, brave Sheriff of Nottingham."

"Ha! you know me?"

"Who better than Robin Hood, King of Sherwood Forest?" came the maddening reply.

"Shoot" the bold-tongued villain!" was all Oswald de Burgh could articulate.

"We have nothing to shoot with except our tongues," growled one of the troopers. "Heaven send us out of this pond, and that quickly, too, or we shall be drowned. My horse is sinking under me."

"Yes," said the outlaw, "I am Robin Hood, and I fear that the Sheriff of Nottingham is in a terrible fix. I wish him well out of it; but now I must return to my friends. Oswald de Burgh, Friar Tuck wishes to be well remembered to you. As for myself, let me warn you that if we are to meet again let it not be in Sherwood Forest."

"The day of my revenge is only put back," Oswald de Burgh cried. "I will—I will—"

"Give me fair words," Robin Hood interrupted, "or perchance you will make the acquaintance of a bolt from a crossbow which one of my brave followers has. Yet, as you say, the day is only put back! You are in my power, but I give you your base life! Think of

it! Think that Robin Hood knows how to be merciful to a foe, especially when he is up to his neck in mud and water. Get out soon, or you will catch a fever. Farewell, Sheriff of Nottingham, and if you should ever honour me with your company again I will remind you of this merry sport. So now, ho! for Sherwood Forest and the shade of the greenwood tree."

* * * * *

As Oswald de Burgh and his men extricated themselves one by one, they heard peals of merry laughter, and the voice of Friar Tuck singing:

"When I was young and had my strength,
I could pull a bow of any length,
Pitch stone, use sword and quarter-staff,
For then I was tall and as straight as a lath.
So ding-dong! Ding-dong!
And ho for the life of a forester bold!"

"Body o' me!" cried Oswald de Burgh. "I will be even with the fat beast yet!"

Whether or not he was able to keep his vow will transpire in future stories of the Bold Robin Hood.

THE END.

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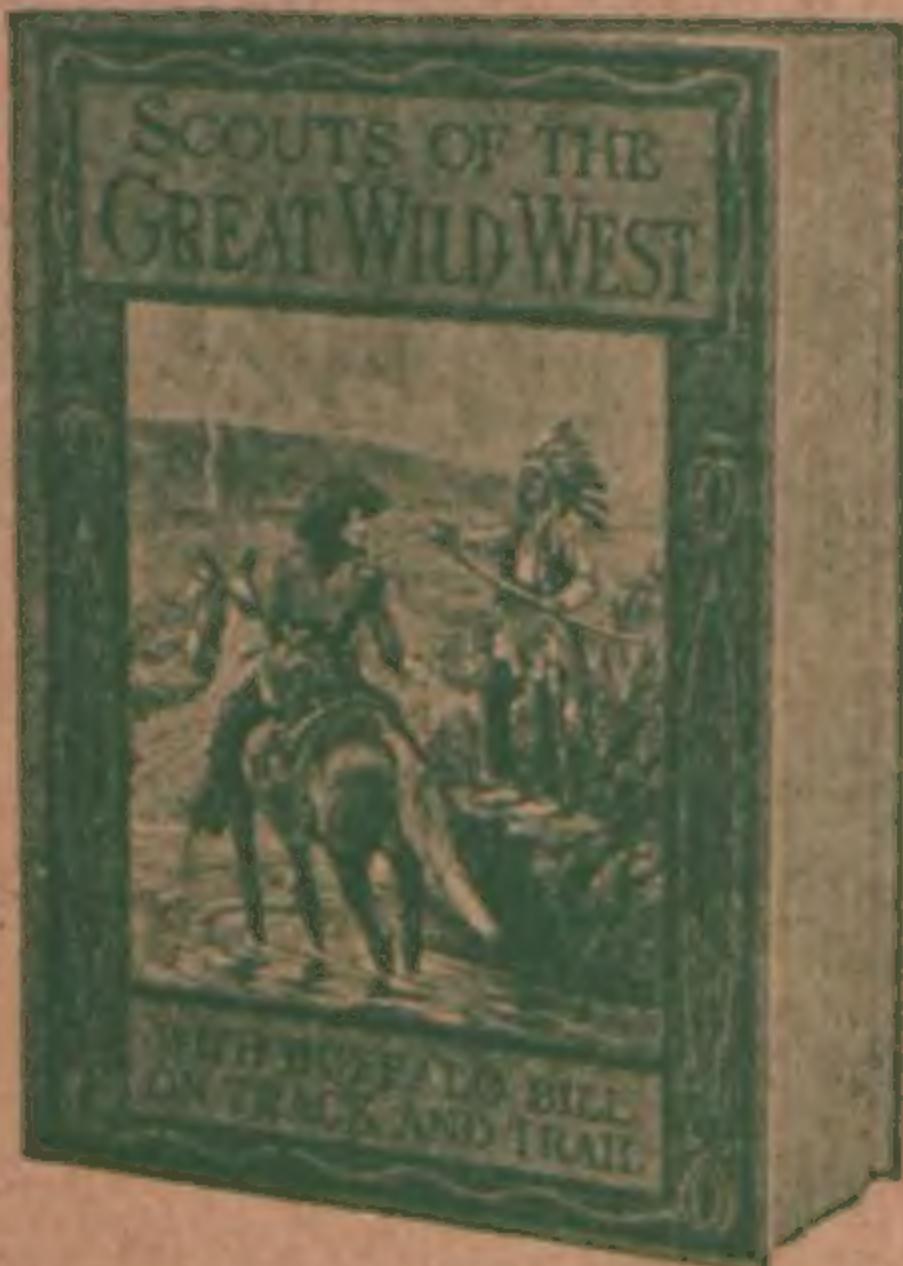
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